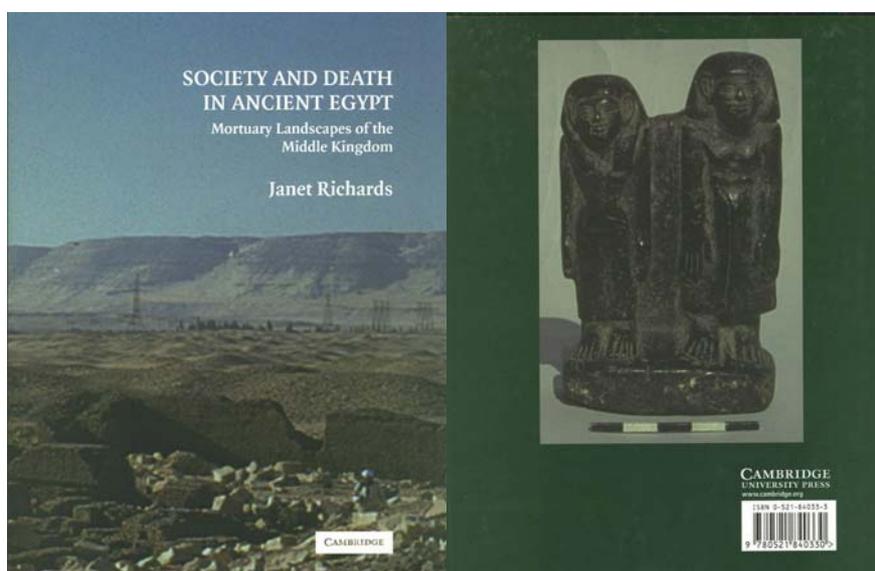


**Richards, J. 2005. Society and death in ancient Egypt mortuary landscapes of the Middle Kingdom. – Cambridge, Cambridge University Press**

Book review by S. Ikram



Egyptology is often criticised for an insufficient amount of theory being applied to the evidence; Janet Richards's book, 'Society and death in ancient Egypt mortuary landscapes of the Middle Kingdom', puts paid to that criticism. It combines anthropological/archaeological theory with hard data to come up with a thorough, balanced analysis of burials and what they tell us about social organisation in ancient Egypt in the Middle Kingdom (and indeed in other periods).

The book is divided into two main parts bracketed by an introduction and conclusion. Following the extremely elegantly written introduction that explores the idea of class, particularly the notion of a middle class existing in the Middle Kingdom, and explaining the methodology used by the author to explore class through mortuary remains, part one, entitled 'The study of ancient social systems' is introduced. The first part of the book is divided into three chapters. Chapter one deals with social differentiation and the notion of class, providing the theoretical framework and general ideas that the author uses as a model to filter her data. This is followed by a chapter that provides some of the hard evidence, both pictorial and textual, that has formed scholar's ideas about the Middle Kingdom. Part one concludes with a final chapter that evaluates additional evidence for the Middle Kingdom from non-mortuary contexts, such as settlements and temples. The exploration of votives as indicators of class is particularly apposite for the work at hand, and Richards provides an admirable evaluation of the different types of *ex votos* and the relevance of their placement in the sacred landscape.

Part II is divided into four chapters, starting with 'People, death, and the 'tomb problem' in Egypt'. This chapter, the longest one in the book and once again, fairly methodological, reviews not only modern views toward death in ancient Egypt, but the attitudes that the Egyptians themselves had toward death, tombs, and mummies. She also discusses different methodological approaches to the study of mortuary remains, sociological issues, and problems of quantifying values for different sorts of burials in order to place them within a socio-economic structure. The next chapter in the section deals with belief and practice relating to death in the Middle Kingdom in both royal and non-royal contexts, including grave goods and their distribution. The remaining chapters provide case studies for investigating social differentiation through mortuary archaeology. Chapter 6 focuses on the sites of Haraga and Riqqa, and chapter 7 on Abydos, the site of Richards's own concession in Egypt. In these two chapters, in order to evaluate wealth, Richards uses wealth indices that include the diversity of grave goods, the number of goods, and the materials of their fabrication. This provides a very useful and scientific model for further studies on social differentiation through mortuary archaeology. The book concludes with a discussion of the role of mortuary archaeology and an analysis of such remains can enhance ones knowledge and view of the socio-political history of a country.

The body of the book is followed by an appendix of Middle Kingdom burials excavated by Richards and her team at Abydos, with the examination of human remains carried out by Brenda J. Baker. The book ends with a bibliography and an index. The book is illustrated with maps, plans, tables, graphs, and black and white photographs where appropriate.

Richards's book is an exemplary piece of work on the application of theory to evidence, yielding a better understanding of social, political, and economic history of a certain time. Her considered use of mortuary data as the basis of a larger understanding of Middle Kingdom is superb, moving well away from the more conventional studies of catalogue-like chronological change in mortuary material, and using the evidence intelligently to shed light on the socio-economic history of the Middle Kingdom. The methodology is sound, her points are cogently argued, and the examples well chosen. The writing is fluid and elegant, making it a joy to read. This book will serve as a template for other works of this nature, and is a book that should grace every scholar and student's bookshelf.

Richards, J. 2005. *Society and death in ancient Egypt mortuary landscapes of the Middle Kingdom*. – Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 262 pp. ISBN 0-521-84033-3. Price £45.00 (hardback).